

SOUTH FORK WILDLIFE AREA

Sequoia National Forest Kern River Ranger District



WHY IS THE AREA UNIQUE?

Here along the South Fork of the Kern River lies one of the most extensive riparian woodlands remaining in California. The term riparian refers to streamside habitats which are characterized in the west by cottonwood and willow trees. Riparian woodlands probably support a greater variety of wildlife than any other habitat. And adding to the significance of this area is the fact that less than 2 percent of California's original riparian forests survive today.

In this area, five major bioregions or ecologically distinct plant communities converge, including The Great Basin, Mojave Desert, Sierran Forest, Coastal Chaparral, and the California Grasslands.

FLORA AND FAUNA OF THE AREA

The riparian forest, although tremendously productive, consists primarily of only two tree species Fremont's cottonwood and willow. Intermixed with these trees are dense stands of mule fat, stinging nettle, and rabbit brush. Cattails, tules, and wild celery abound in wet areas.

Birds of the South Fork Wildlife Area are found in great abundance and diversity. Over 315 bird species have been observed using the area. The area attracts large numbers of neotropical migratory birds. These birds nest and forage in the riparian forest during the summer and fly in the winter to Mexico, South America and Central America.

Examples include the state endangered yellow-billed cuckoo and the federally endangered southwestern willow flycatcher. Other species include the summer tanager, yellow warbler, tri-colored blackbird and yellow-breasted chat.

Birds of prey seen soaring over the wildlife area include the golden eagle, bald eagle, osprey, and several species of owls. The area is home to a variety of waterfowl such as the double-crested cormorant, hooded merganser, and the wood duck. Other bird species of special interest area the white pelican, great blue heron, turkey vulture, and the belted kingfisher.

Mammals found in the area include mule deer, beaver, coyote, grey fox, bobcat, racoon, and occasionally black bear and mountain lion. A sizeable population of southwestern pond turtles live in the ponds of the wildlife area.

RECREATION VALUES

In addition to its wildlife values, the South Fork Wildlife area provides unique recreational opportunities to many visitors. Fishing, hunting, canoeing, and hiking are activities that attract recreation enthusiasts to Lake Isabella and this area. Birdwatchers, botanists and teachers come to study and teach about the ecological values of the riparian forest.

COOPERATIVE MANAGEMENT

The Forest Service manages and studies the South Fork Wildlife Area utilizing partnership agreements and cooperative relationships with the Audubon-California, California Department of Fish and Game, Kern River Research Center, South Fork Resource District and private landowners.



**United States
Department of
Agriculture**

**Forest
Service
Pacific Southwest Region**

Sequoia National Forest



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Special Regulations

In cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Army Corps of Engineers, Kern County and the Forest Service, a special speed limit is implemented each year for all lake motorcraft traveling within the South Fork Wildlife Area at Lake Isabella. Effective July 1, all motorized use within this riparian forest is restricted to 5 miles per hour. The area of the speed restriction is clearly marked with buoys and aluminum signs.

The speed limit serves to benefit many lake users, particularly the wildlife that breed in the South Fork riparian forest between the months of May through August. By restricting the speed of motorcraft, the impact to nesting wildlife is minimized. Almost 200 species of birds nest in this area each year including raptors, owls, osprey, waterfowl and many species of migratory songbirds.

In addition to protecting the breeding interests of the wildlife, a variety of lake users will likely realize the benefits of having a speed limit including fishermen who utilize this popular fishing spot, canoeists, kayakers and nature watchers who enjoy the diversity of wildlife found in the area. Most importantly, the speed limit will ensure the safety of lake users among the willow and cottonwood trees, which have been inundated by the high lake level causing underwater hazards and a danger to motorcraft traveling too fast.

Over the last several years, unauthorized vehicle use and overnight camping especially during high water years, has resulted in the trampling and destruction of riparian forest habitat. As a result, the use of overnight camping, vehicles and campfires is prohibited in this unique area.

These actions are examples of a cooperative effort between several local and federal agencies working toward management of Lake Isabella in a way that will benefit all users.

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